

Selected Story.

THE CHRISTMAS ROSE.

It was a stormy Christmas eve, and the little town of Tromsøe was completely enveloped in the ermine mantle of mid-winter. Snow had been falling all day, and as night approached, large flakes were still being driven hither and thither by the furious wind, which howled and roared in the chimneys, shook the carefully closed windows, and died away in the distance like the last, despairing wail of a lost soul.

In one of the most miserable houses of a wretched street, in the worst quarter of the town, a woman by the dim light of a flickering candle watched beside the sick-bed of her last remaining child. She was weeping bitterly, but strove to stifle her sobs for fear of disturbing the fitful slumbers of the sufferer. As the furious tempest shook the dilapidated tenement, she trembled as if she already felt the dread presence of the Angel of Death. No Christmas lagot blazed on the miserable hearth, the happy voices of laughing children and kind friends had for her long been stilled, and the cold, sorrow and poverty which reigned within seemed but a counterpart of the desolation which reigned without. Behind the lowered curtains of the bed could be heard from time to time the short cough and labored breathing of the child, who at last, suddenly awaking, raised herself on her elbow, and looked across the room, where, as in a vision, she again beheld the Christmas trees of her earlier years, with their accompaniments of tapers, bon-bons, toys and golden stars, gleaming amid the darkness of that sombre room. She was a young girl of twelve or fourteen years of age, and the sweet pale face, although in the last stage of emaciation, still retained traces of delicate youthful beauty.

With her dying voice she still continued to talk of the late-days of long ago, when she was a rosy, healthful little child, and her brothers and sisters Eric, John, Anton, Hilda and Bertha, crowded around her with their pretty Christmas offerings; when her father danced her on his knee, and her mother sang sweet lullabys by her cradle. Those days seemed far away. Eric and her father had perished in a shipwreck; then, one by one, the others had followed, till death had left behind only the grim sisters, sickness and misery, as the sole companions of the widow and her child.

The vivid remembrance of past happiness had brought a strange light into Greta's eyes, and soon these childish remembrances gave place to hope. She spoke of the spring which would bring back the birds and flowers, and in giving life to all else would surely not entirely forget herself.

"You know, mother, the doctor said that, when the roses came, my sufferings would be over. Will the roses soon be in bloom?"

"I have seen some already," replied the mother; "the governor's wife and daughter had them in their hair when I saw them get into the carriage, but those roses, I think, only grow in the hothouses of the rich."

There was silence, broken only by Greta's short cough. All at once, carried away by one solitary fixed idea, such as often haunts the brain of the sick, she began again to talk about the roses, to pine sorrowfully for their possession, and by alternate beseeching, coaxing and commanding she at last induced her mother to go out in search of some for her.

The poor woman left the bedside possessed with the one desire of pacifying her child, and traversed the streets with weary steps, debating in her mind what excuse she could make on her return for not having procured that which she felt was entirely beyond her reach. With bowed head and sorrowful heart she kept repeating to herself the words of the physician, so full of hope for Greta: "At the coming of the first roses she would suffer no more;" and well as she guessed the mournful meaning of the prophecy, she could not help being inspired for an instant by that spirit of hope which buoyed up her child. Quickening her steps, she took the road as if by a sudden inspiration towards the governor's mansion, hesitated as she reached the brilliantly lighted mansion, but at last, taking courage, knocked timidly at the door, which was immediately opened by a manservant.

"What do you want, my good woman?"

"To speak to Madame Patterson."

"I cannot disturb Madame at such an hour of the night."

"Oh! I implore you, let me see her!"

The servant repulsed the poor mother, and was about to shut the door in her face when Madame Patterson and her daughter, with roses in their hair and on their bosoms, crossed the hall, paused to question the servant, and then approached the widow, who briefly and tearfully told her pathetic story.

"O, Madame! O, Mademoiselle! I implore you to give me one rose, only one, for my dying child! God, who gave his son for the redemption of the world, will reward you."

Madame Patterson shrugged her shoulders with a mocking laugh and passed on. Her daughter, the brilliant Bdele, remarked that her father did not buy roses for their weight in gold, to throw away upon street beggars.

The door closed, and the woman turned towards her home. On pass-

ing the church of the Sainte-Britta, she perceived the clergyman's wife laying large bouquets of roses on the altar, full blown blooms of rich red, as well as branches of exquisite buds of blush, orange and pink.

The lady formed a sweet picture as she bent over and arranged the floral treasures sent her by a rich parishioner of her husband's. Her blue eyes sparkled with delight, and her voice was soft and silvery. She was the mother of six lovely children, and the widow felt that she would surely pity her in her bitter grief. Full of these hopeful thoughts, she entered the church, approached the altar, and preferred her modest request for one rose wherewith to gladden the eyes of her dying child.

Madame Neils, although by no means devoid of kindly feeling, was proud in her own way, and had determined that Sainte-Britta should be the best decorated church in the town. In what she mistook for pious enthusiasm, she forgot that the only true temple of God is the human heart—that a charitable action is more precious in his sight than the costliest earthly offering which can be laid on his material altar. In the ardor of her outward devotion, she forgot that Christ himself had declared, "Inasmuch as ye have done it unto the least of one of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me," and in her mistaken zeal she avowed that it would be little less than a sacrilege to rob the altar of God of even one fair blossom. Upon so great and joyful a festival as Christmas, it showed, she added, a lamentable lack of religious feeling to prefer such a request. She pointed out that poverty, sickness and death were sent by God himself, and the true Christian should submit to them, not merely without a murmur, but joyfully, kissing the rod in remembrance of the gracious declaration, "As many as I love I rebuke and chasten." She offered to call on the following day for the purpose of exhorting Greta to submit to the will of God with entire resignation.

The mother had now lost all hope, and was returning to her home in a still more desponding frame of mind than that in which she had quitted it. She walked on as in a dream, scarcely noticing the fast-falling snow, while longing with an intensity bordering on agony that she might have been able to procure even a few of the common flowers for her Greta. But none were to be found. Even the snowdrops hid themselves in the bosom of the earth, and no primrose nor violet would be seen for months. Thus sorrowfully musing, she continued her walk, and in a few minutes would have reached her miserable home, when by the light of her lantern she saw a few green leaves peeping from the foot of a hedge which enclosed a garden in the neighborhood. Stooping down, she scraped away the snow with her hand. Yes, there were leaves large and lustrous, under which she found a few green blossoms, some full blown, others in bud, but all pale, small and without color, perfume or beauty.

"Ah!" thought she, "as there were no roses to be procured, these flowers have been sent that my child may be spared the pain of knowing that there are hearts so cold and hard that no woes of others can soften them, and who care for no sorrows except their own!"

As she hastened onward, the deep-toned bell struck the hour of midnight and the joyous Christmas chimes broke on her ear. Kneeling reverently on the snowy ground, the mother's heart went up in gratitude, and she prayed the all-merciful one to look with pitying eyes on her sweet and cherished Greta, pressing the humble flowers to her bosom. In another moment, she had risen and passed onward with her treasure.

As she drew back the curtain to offer the dark leaves and little green blossoms to her darling, she made a discovery which startled her. They had given place to large, exquisite white blooms tinged with a delicate pink.

"Roses! roses!" cried Greta, "O, mother! who gave them to you?"

"It was a Christmas present," replied the astonished mother.

At the sight of these lovely Christmas roses, the dying girl bowed her head and softly kissed each precious blossom. Then she fell back on her pillow with a sigh. "The light that never was on land or sea" came into the beautiful blue eyes, and her lips half-opened with a radiant smile. The prophecy of the doctor was fulfilled. The roses had appeared, and her suffering was ended. Her pure young spirit had passed upward in one ecstatic burst of love and thanksgiving.

Since that time (long ago) the plant which grows under the hedges, beneath the snows of winter, has continued to produce beautiful white blossoms and retained the name of "The Christmas Rose," which was given it by the good woman of Tromsøe.—[Romance.]

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